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METHODS BRIEFING 18

Verbatim Quotations in Applied Social Research: Theory, Practice and Impact

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November 2002 – July 2005

A series of methods briefings from projects funded by ESRC as part of the Research Methods Programme.

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Background

Including verbatim quotations from research participants has become effectively standard practice in much of the written output from qualitative applied social research. Support for this approach is being strengthened in the development of formal methods for critical appraisal and evaluation of policy-related qualitative studies. However, until fairly recently it was hard to find detailed discussion about the relationship between theorisation and quotations, or any detailed explanation of the process of selection or presentation of verbatim words, both within methodological texts and research reports themselves. There were few examples of investigation of the impact on readers of quotations, or the views of those who spoke the words.

Aims

This study aimed to investigate inclusion of verbatim quotations within written reports of applied social research findings, from the perspectives of researchers, research users and people who take part in research.

The objectives were:

- to review conceptual and theoretical arguments for using verbatim quotations in presenting findings
- to explore current practice and beliefs among social researchers

- to explore expectations and preferences of users of research to investigate views of those who speak the words that are presented
- to test the accessibility, acceptability and impact of different ways of including verbatim quotations in research accounts.

The study comprised four elements:

- 1) a review of theoretical and methodological texts
- 2) desk-based analysis of recent reports of qualitative applied social research
- 3) two parallel series of depth interviews with researchers and research users
- 4) an empirical study to test the impact of a report containing spoken words on those who had taken part and on users of the same report.

Key findings

Researchers' views

Depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected group of experienced qualitative social researchers, whose publications were likely to have been influential in policy, practice or teaching. Their areas of expertise included social care, health, education, family policy, social work, employment, housing and criminal justice.

Reasons for using quotations

The researchers interviewed explained their underlying reasons for using the quotations within the following main constructs:

- presenting discourse as the matter for enquiry (as in conversation and narrative analysis)
- presenting quotations as evidence
- presenting spoken words for explanation of how something happened
- using quotations for illustration of emerging themes
- using quotations to deepen readers' understanding
- presenting spoken words to enable participants' voice
- using quotations to enhance readability.

It was often not easy for the researchers to tease out and describe the process by which they selected spoken words and blended these with their narrative. The way they did this depended on their purpose, but was also influenced by experiences of reading other authors' work; practices prevailing within the research groups within which they worked; response of research funders and users; expectations of publishers, and reviewers' comments.

Views on editing transcripts

There was general commitment to presenting transcript material with as little editing as possible. However, this was balanced against the need for a report which was easy to read, maintained participants' anonymity and met ethical requirements. There were pragmatic influences such as length of output. As a result, researchers' practices in editing transcript material varied considerably. There were hard decisions to make when spoken words might seem very different in comparison with the researcher's prose or the way other research participants spoke, for example regional dialects and speech affected by impairments or health conditions.

Attribution of quotations

The way in which quotations were attributed to speakers was influenced by the focus of the

research, the topic area, the purpose in using the quotation, readability and the need to maintain anonymity. Some researchers found that funders were asking for increasingly detailed 'labels' and descriptors at the end of quotations, and care was needed to ensure anonymity. Some researchers liked the use of pseudonyms.

Rarely were there explicit discussions with members of the general public or service users taking part in research about how their spoken words might be published, and there was some unease around this. In much contracted policy-related social research, timetable and budget constraints meant researchers were unable to return to participants to show them transcripts of interviews or draft reports.

Views of research users

Depth interviews were conducted with a group of research users known to be influential in policy and practice. They included senior policy makers and research managers from government departments; senior managers from key UK organisations which fund and disseminate social research; senior personnel in independent and voluntary organisations which both provide services and aim to influence policy; and senior practitioners/academics in applied social science university departments and hospital schools.

All said that reading output from social research was an important part of their work. Most regularly read and used findings based on both quantitative and qualitative research. The wide range of output they saw required making decisions about the quality of the underlying research and the reliability and robustness of findings reported. People expected to find verbatim quotations in output based on qualitative approaches such as interviews and group discussions.

Reading styles

Their approach to reading was usually selective, skimming or scanning a document to get an impression of content and importance, and then dipping in to parts which seemed useful. Senior policy makers who had time only to read abstract, introduction, summary and conclusions

often never got as far as reading verbatim quotations. Those people who did go into the body of the report usually made an early judgement about the way in which the quotations were used and whether it would be helpful to read them. Judgements were made on the basis of the impact of the first few quotations they looked at and their own assumptions and expectations, because it was very unusual to see any explanation from the researchers themselves about their selection or use of verbatim words.

Value of quotations

People who had no experience themselves of writing up qualitative research said it was often very hard to assess how researchers were using the quotations. Doubts about the researchers' objectivity could easily arise. There were various suggestions about ways in which they thought researchers were probably using the quotations, (and these mirrored many of the purposes which researchers had themselves described in the parallel series of interviews). However, differences of opinion among the research users meant that what some people liked and recognised as making a positive impact on their reading and understanding was, among others, disliked and a source of irritation. One example was apparent use of quotations for illustration. Some readers liked quotations which gave easily accessible illustrative material, especially if the topic was technical or detailed. Others had strong negative reactions and were irritated by quotations which apparently repeated the author's points. Some said this use of quotations could suggest a researcher's defensive need to reassure readers that the research had been done, or lack of confidence that readers would trust their analysis.

Research users felt that using verbatim quotations gave researchers a powerful tool for getting across their own personal or political message, or using emotional influence to enhance findings. It was thought that researchers with integrity would guard against this, but had little control over the way in which the quotations they presented were subsequently used by readers.

Views of research participants and report readers

Designing the study

As a basis for testing the impact of verbatim quotations, a small scale study of a local service was conducted. The service supported people trying volunteering as a way of moving towards paid work. The study provided managers and staff with information to inform service development. Thirteen service users took part in depth interviews about their views and experience of the service. Draft chapters of findings included verbatim quotations from all participants, blended with the authors' narrative, and displayed as indented, italicised text attributed by gender and age group. The draft chapters were taken back to participants, and eleven took part in a second interview, exploring their views on the report and the way their words were represented.

People's suggestions for changes were incorporated in the final version of the report, which was sent to the service manager and other senior government officials who would use the report. The manager and research users then met in a group with the researchers, to discuss the impact of the quotations.

Views on value of quotations

Those who had used the volunteering service and took part in the interviews (called here speakers) liked having quotations in the report. They made the report easier to read and more interesting, and provided evidence that the researchers really had spoken to people. Some liked the way in which the quotations gave people a chance to have their say.

Research users also thought the quotations enhanced readability, and provided evidence which contributed to credibility. However, such impacts were not the researchers' intentions. They had selected and used verbatim words to show terms and concepts used by people and how these linked together, and to indicate depth of feeling, confusions or hesitations. Some research users perceived an illustrative purpose, and wondered whether selection reflected in some way the balance of views in a quantitative sense. Such perceptions led to some misinterpretations.

Views on editing transcripts

There were strong views among both speakers and research users as to whether the transcript material should be, or had been edited for the report. Discussion between research users showed that some forms of non-standard grammar or speech patterns, when represented as text, could produce different images in the minds of different readers, and possibly lead to questioning the validity and importance of what was said. This was just what some speakers had feared, leading them to ask for changes to punctuation or grammar in their own words. Views were polarised, however, and some speakers argued that any editing would be wrong, because the report should present people's real words without alteration by the researcher.

Anonymity

The researchers had taken what they thought was considerable care in ensuring anonymity, including the links between narrative and verbatim words, and the form of attributions. Anonymity was very important to the service users, and those who saw the report perceived themselves there as anonymous. However, the service manager and some members of staff said they probably did recognise some of the clients whose words were used, from the ways in which individual people talked about their experiences. This was an important lesson about the power of textual representation of spoken words.

Further analysis

Further output from this study will include the conceptual and theoretical review of methods texts, and the desk-based analysis of general

styles of use of quotations. From this general context, and the findings from empirical work reported above, there will be implications for practice for researchers who use verbatim quotations in reporting their findings.

Selected publications

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2006) Exploring 'quality': research participants' perspectives on verbatim quotations, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 9, 2, 97-110.

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2005) Verbatim quotations: whose views count?, *Qualitative Researcher*, 1, 4-6.

Research reports

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2006) *Using Verbatim Quotations in Reporting Qualitative Social Research: Researchers' views*, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, York.

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2005) *Research Participants' Views on Use of Verbatim Quotations*, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, York.

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2005) *The Impact of Verbatim Quotations on Research Users: Qualitative exploration*, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, York.

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2006) *Using Verbatim Quotations in Reporting Qualitative Social Research: Research users' views*, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.

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